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Israeli Rabbi Accused of Racism Says Barred From U.S. by 'anti-Zionists'

Shmuel Eliyahu's bureau accused the Reform movement of 'silencing' the controversial rabbi after his travel visa was revoked

Sam Sokol May 31, 2022 

A controversial Israeli state rabbi claims to have been barred from travelling to the United States, asserting that Embassy officials revoked his travel visa before expiry at the instigation of anti-Zionist and non-Orthodox groups.

"Despite appeals to the U.S. Consulate, we have received no reasoning to explain the reason for the revocation of a visa that had been valid for decades," the bureau of Shmuel Eliyahu, the chief rabbi of the northern Israeli city of Safed, said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Our inquiries show that this is an act of anti-Zionists such as the Reform movement, bodies that frequently try to infringe on freedom of expression and silence the rabbi. After failing to silence Rabbi Eliyahu in legal ways, they are now trying to silence the rabbi [through] petty methods. There is no reason to worry – they will not succeed."

Eliyahu's son Amihai confirmed that his father's U.S. visa had been revoked while the rabbi's chief of staff Ahiya Medad told Haaretz that he had not received an explanation for the American decision "despite our attempts to understand."

Exhibit No.

3

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Medad declined to elaborate on his office's statement nor did he offer any proof for his assertion.

Asked for comment, a U.S. Embassy spokesperson said that "visa records are confidential under U.S. law; therefore, we cannot discuss the details of individual visa cases."

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said in response to the statements: "Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu is well known for his racist views which most Jews and supporters of Israel find offensive and which the Israeli Supreme Court strongly condemned. As a purveyor of hatred towards Arabs, non-Orthodox Jews, LGBTQ and others, his views sully the strong moral case we regularly make on behalf of the State of Israel."

He continued, "Our Israeli Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) has led and will continue to lead the legal fight against his regular incitement of racism. We were not involved in the decision to deny him a visa but if the rabbi is upset he should undertake a thorough *cheshbon hanefesh*, an honest assessment of his deeds, which is surely the reason he's not a welcome figure across the Jewish and democratic world."

Eliyahu, the son of former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, is known for his extreme stances, and has previously been indicted for incitement to racism. In one occasion, he called to remove all of Safed Academic College's Arab students following a suicide attack on a bus near Meron in northern Israel.

In 2008, he called on the government to carry out "state-sanctioned revenge" against Arabs in order to, in his words,

restore Israel's deterrence in the wake of a terrorist attack at Jerusalem's Mercaz Harav yeshiva in which eight students were killed.

In 2013, Israel's then-attorney general called on him not to run for the post of Sephardi chief rabbi, in light of certain contentious remarks and the "legal difficulties" posed by his candidacy.

In response, the rabbi denied having made racist remarks, explaining some of his comments as being taken out of context while insisting others were never uttered.

"Must I as a rabbi explain why I oppose intermarriage?" he wrote in a letter defending his record. "Must I explain why I oppose same-sex marriages or support people becoming observant?"

In 2019, the rabbi told teenagers suspected of murdering a Palestinian woman in the West Bank that they shouldn't fear prison since that's where the road to political power begins, prompting several rights groups to call for disciplinary action and criminal charges to be filed against him.

Two months earlier, the High Court of Justice had ordered then-Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked to explain why she had not taken disciplinary action against Eliyahu for a number of statements that he made, including disparaging remarks about Arabs and gays.

The following year, the court ordered that Eliyahu, whose salary is paid by the state, be subject to a disciplinary hearing for his comments, citing, among other statements, one in which he said that "we must try to make sure that anyone who raises a hand against a Jew should be killed,

revenge must be taken. Even if he didn't kill but just hit [a Jew] or wanted to kill him."

It was the first time a municipal rabbi in Israel was subject to such action.

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